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ABSTRACT

Individuals organize their behaviors in light of the social groups of which they consider themselves a part. Risks shared between individuals take on symbolic significance and become cultural meanings for those involved. In other words, risks provide content for creating shared knowledge significant for group relations. This study examined the question of whether differences in peer culture would map onto differences in reported risks. Subjects (N=41) were 16- to 18-year-olds who were interviewed about their reflections about risks taken by themselves, their friends, and hypothetical story characters. To identify specific affiliative patterns within the sample, subjects were asked to provide a list of close friends with whom they were likely to do risky and adventurous things. These responses provided the raw material for determining boundaries between groups, and were quantified with a package of social clustering and ordination techniques. Five separate groups were identified. Two groups were highly cohesive, with one in being contact with a larger community of teenagers and the other not. On one of the cohesive groups several members nominated individuals outside their group as partners in risk. In the other cohesive group no outside group members were nominated. The relatedness of peer group structure and the structure of reported risks has implications for the maintenance and transformation of peer group culture. (ABL)

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ADOLESCENT ADVENTURES AND PEER GROUP CULTURES

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Adolescent Adventures and Peer Group Cultures

Introduction

I would like to begin by telling you of an experience I had some years ago while working in a program for teenage mothers and their babies. Most of the mothers were either white and middle class, or Hispanic and poor. One day an Hispanic mother was accused of stealing a cosmetic bag from the purse of a white mother. A fight broke out, organized along racial lines. The staff intervened, and all the young women--about 50--were called into the large meeting room for the purpose of resolving the conflict. The program director proceeded to ask questions about who was accussed by whom, of what crime, on the basis of what evidence, and so forth. Her stragegy did not quell emotions, but refuelled them. More insults were exchanged and another fist fight seemed unavoidable. Just then Cecelia stood up and reminded everyone that their babies were all downstairs playing, eating or sleeping together in the daycare, and asked whether their common interest in trying to get by as teenagers with babies didn't supersede ethnic differences-- or at least mascara. The change in the emotional tone that pervaded the room was remarkable. I'm not saying that everyone beame best buddies, or that things weren't tense for some days. But there were no more angry or violent outbursts. The mothers managed their behaviors, and did so, I think, because Cecelia forced them to shift reference groups from those that divided them, to one that united them with common goals and values.

I use this story as an example of how individuals organize their behaviors in light of the social groups that they consider themselves a part of. Although violence may have been acceptable behavior given a definition of themselves as Hispanic or white, or as ripped off or falsely accused, it was incompatible with images they had of themselves as members of the teen mothers' community. Shibutani (1955), who extended Sherif's position on reference groups as psychological anchor points used to organize behavior (e.g., Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood & Sherif, 1961; Sherif & Sherif, 1964), would have argued that participating in the teen mothers' community led to the internalization of group norms--norms that were incompatible with hurting other group members.

I would like to use reference group theory, in conjunction with Vygotsky's (1979) developmental theory, to describe the social-psychological ecology of adolescent risk-taking. My argument is that risks shared between individuals take on symbolic significance and become cultural meanings for those involved. In other words, risks provide content for creating shared knowledge significant for group relations.

Work that I have presented elsewhere indicates that adolescents between the ages of 16 and 18 perceive risk-taking as a culture creating device that impacts the developmental course of their friendships (Lightfoot, in press). Risky activities are understood to impact friendships more profoundly and more positively than other social experiences because they are a source of novelty, memories and secrets, and because they contribute to group identity. Furthermore, acquaintence relationships that are in the process of constructing a collective identity are considered more vulnerable to the effects of social adventures compared to close friend relationships that are defined already by a rich narrative of shared experiences.

This evidence suggests that it may be reasonable to conceptualize adolescent risk-taking as a mechanism through which peer culture is generated and sustained. The case for this position would be stronger, however, if it could be demonstrated that differences in peer culture would map on to differences in reported risks. I would like to focus now on the relationship between the structure of specific peer groups, and the structure of risks reported by peer group members.

Clustering risks and friends

41 16-18 year olds were interviewed on two separate occasions in locations of their choice. I spent about three hours with each across the two sessions. The sessions included some formal reasoning and perspective taking tasks but were primarily focused on their reflections about risks taken by themselves, their friends, and hypothetical story characters.

To identify specific affiliative patterns within the sample, subjects were asked to provide a list of close friends with whom they were likely to do risky and adventurous things. Their responses provided the raw material for determining boundaries between groups, and were quantified with a package of social clustering and ordination techniques developed by Gariepy (1990). The procedures provided information about the affiliative profiles of each individual in relation to all other individuals in the sample--that is, whether specific individuals were close to certain other individuals--they "hung out" together--or whether they were more distant.

A Principal Component Analysis was conducted, which took information about the profiles of all individuals, and organized them in such a way that highly correlated profiles were brought together in geometric space.

Principle Component Analysis

This procedure, in conjunction with an Hierarchical Clustering procedure, allowed me to identify 5 separate groups. I'd like to draw your attention to two group-structural features illuminated by the analysis. The first concerns the dispersion of points (members) within groups, and suggests that groups 1 and 5 may be more cohesive compared to the other three (note 1); it also indicates that group 5 contains a peripheral member who stands apart from the more central members. The second group-structural feature concerns the distance between groups and suggests that group 5 may be more distant from the other groups and, thus, more isolated from the larger teen community.

The Principle Component Analysis suggested that the structure of individual peer groups might differ both in terms of cohesiveness and isolation. We can see differences in group cohesion more clearly if we look at the profile correlations within each group--that is, within groups, how similar teens are to each other with respect to who they nominate as partners in risk.

Correlation Matrices for Social Clusters

It seemed reasonable to take the mean of these correlations for each group and call it an index of group cohesion. What we find, as suggested by the PCA, is that groups 1 and 5 are highly cohesive compared to the other three (note 2).

Having fairly specific ideas about who hangs out with whom and how tight or cohesive the groups are, I'd like to consider the types of risks reported by members of different groups.

Reported Risks

These data were culled from two sources. One was a general question about the types of risky things that group members do together; the other was a request for a personal story about a recent risk or adventure.

I want to draw your attention again to groups 1 and 5 who have already been marked as highly cohesive. This time, however, I want to point out their differences in patterns of risk taking. First, group 1 looks similar to groups 2, 3 and 4 in terms of the content of risks reported. Group 5, in contrast, looks quite different. Drug use is more salient, and members of this group report risks that are not reported by any of the other groups--LSD, fights, frat parties. So this group is different in terms of the types of risks that they DO report. Moreover, they differ according to the types of risks that they DO NOT report. Specifically, they do not take risks that bring them into contact with other teenagers outside their immediate clique or cluster. They don't drive around looking for parties (the parties they do report involve going to an adult's apartment and taking drugs), and they don't hang out.

Thus far, we have two highly cohesive groups, and based on the types of risks reported, it seems that one group is in contact with a larger community of teenagers, whereas the other is not. This returns us to the issue of relative isolation, and raises an important question: How permeable are the

boundaries that define the groups? That is, to what extent are there outside-group affiliations?

Permeability of Cluster Boundaries

This figure shows the pair-wise nominations for all individuals. Here we can see that several members in the first highly cohesive group nominate indivdiuals outside their group as partners in risk. On the other hand, in the second highly cohesive group, no outside groups members are nominated, with the exception of the one peripheral member. The relative isolation of the second group was also apparent in several other areas. I asked for names of people that they hung out with, but weren't as close to. Members of the first group provided large lists of such acquaintances, whereas members of the second group gave none. The isolation of this group was also reflected in their plans for the future: They wanted to stay together and become rock and roll stars. Members of the other group, in contrast, had a variety of future interests, all of which involved moving into new social circles. Most planned on going to college, but beyond that, there was a lot of variability, and talk of becoming doctors, lawyers, engineers, artists, as well as rock and roll stars.

Conclusion

The relatedness of peer group structure and the structure of reported risks has interesting implications for the maintenence and transformation of peer group culture. Peer group cultures, like the individuals who participate in them, are in a continuous state of flux and development. New affiliative patterns emerge, in conjunction with interests and values. On the other

hand, some groups may be more stable than others by virtue of their relative isolation from potential sources of change that exist outside the particular social system.

The argument has been made in many contexts that the peer group is an important vehicle of adolescent social and cognitive development because it is a source of novel and conflicting ideas (e.g., Inhelder & Piaget, 1954; Selman, 1980; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). However, in a group marked by a high degree of intra-group similarity, or cohesion, and a high degree of isolation from other groups, these experiences might be more limited. In fact, Dunphy (1963) suggested almost 30 years ago that a major function of the clique is to provide members access to the larger crowd where new social identifications, relationships, and values are forged. The crowd, in other words, perhaps more than the clique, is the location of important social-cognitive developments. If this is the case, we have reason to worry about cliques that are isolated from the larger teen community, and consequently, potential sources of growth and development.

More generally, understanding the relatedness between peer group structure and the structure of reported risks brings us closer to understanding how interpersonal experiences acquire cultural significance and thereby direct and motivate people's action.

Notes

Note 1. The analysis generated a single point instead of the five points shown closely clustered for group 1, and generated a single point instead of the six points shown closely clustered for group 5. In other words, the social profiles of individuals who are central to these two groups are so highly correlated that the analysis generated single points for them; they have been artifically separated here to keep track of numbers within groups.

Note 2. The cohesion index for group 5 was calculated without the profile correlation of the peripheral member.

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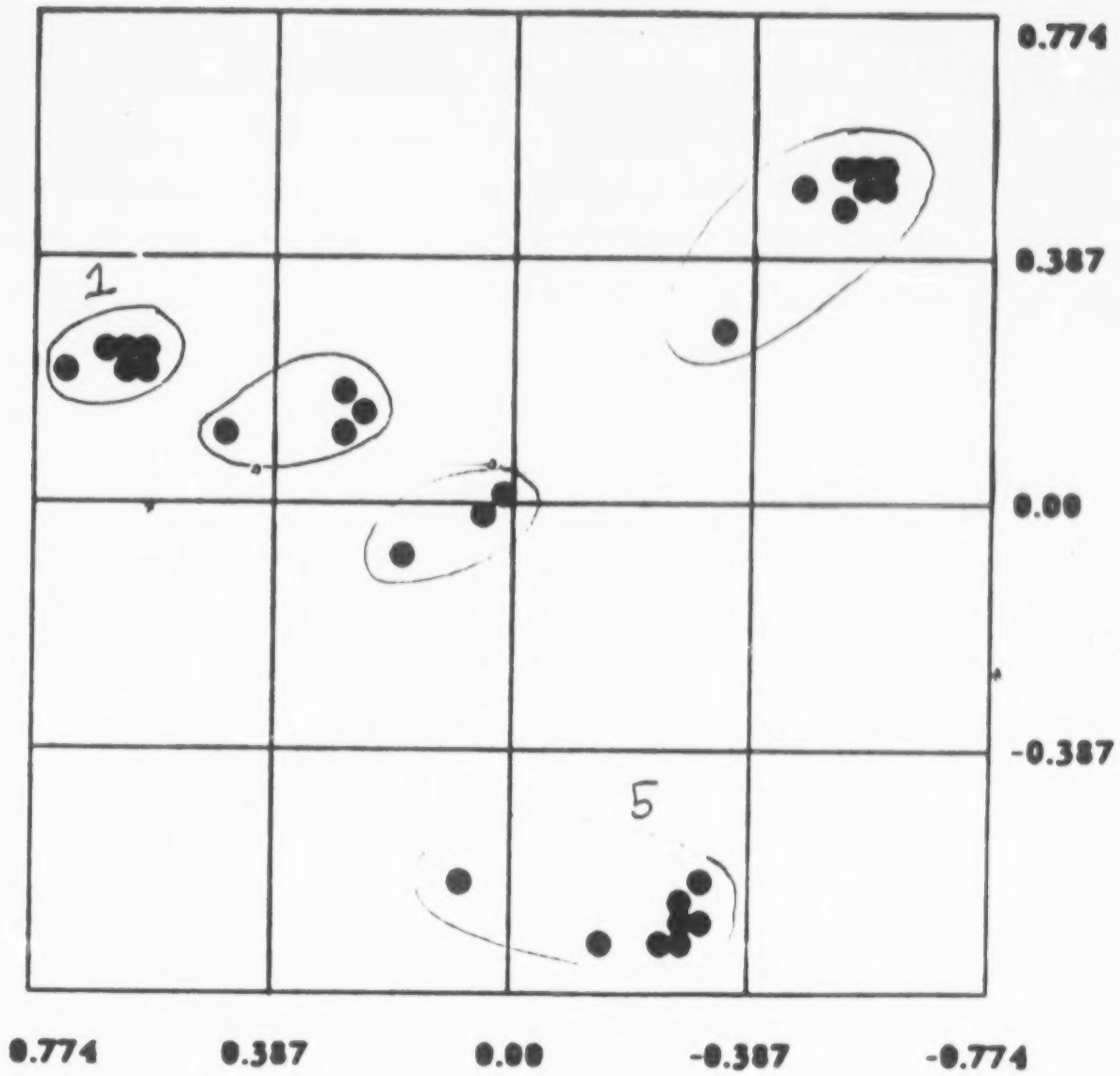
PRINCIPAL COMPONENT ANALYSIS



CORRELATION MATRICES FOR SOCIAL CLUSTERS

CLUSTER 1 $\bar{X} = .91$

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	---	.98	.97	.77	.98	.93
2		---	.99	.80	.99	.96
3			---	.78	.99	.98
4				---	.80	.79
5					---	.96
6						---

CLUSTER 2 $\bar{X} = .68$

	1	2	3	4
1	---	1.0	.58	.53
2		---	.58	.53
3			---	.86
4				---

CLUSTER 3 $\bar{X} = .58$

	1	2	3
1	---	.71	.56
2		---	.46
3			---

CLUSTER 4 $\bar{X} = .76$

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	---	.76	.93	.90	.76	.76	.65	.44
2		---	.66	.65	.84	.84	.68	.20
3			---	.95	.63	.63	.53	.74
4				---	.54	.54	.45	.66
5					---	.90	.82	.16
6						---	.82	.16
7							---	.12
8								---

CLUSTER 5 $\bar{X} = .90$

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	---	.95	.94	.98	.93	.94	.90	.55
2		---	.88	.95	.84	.85	.95	.51
3			---	.97	.85	.84	.89	.64
4				---	.85	.86	.93	.63
5					---	.99	.77	.39
6						---	.77	.38
7							---	.70
8								---

PERCENTAGE OF SUBJECTS REPORTING RISKS BY CLUSTER

	CLUSTER				
	1	2	3	4	5
RISK CATEGORY					
parent-sanctioned	0	0	0	14	0
pranks	0	50	50	0	0
sneak out	50	25	50	57	50
drink	33	75	0	57	67
hang out	67	0	0	43	17
party	67	75	100	86	50
drive	100	75	50	43	17
marijuana	17	0	0	14	67
frat parties/bars	0	0	0	29	67
fight	0	0	0	0	33
LSD	0	0	0	0	43

PERMEABILITY OF CLUSTER BOUNDARIES